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ABSTRACT

To examine the effects of word processing on basic writers, a pilot study compared two classes of basic writers (40 students)--one class using word processors and one class using handwriting--at Glenville State College in West Virginia. At the beginning of the semester, students from both sections wrote one explanatory essay and one persuasive essay using pen and paper as a pretest measure. Teachers from both sections collaborated throughout the semester, using identical transactional writing task assignments for their classes. At the end of the semester, students (now about half the original number) wrote two different tasks for analysis, writing within the context of normal class assignments and using the writing processes developed during the semester. The word processor section wrote their papers on word processors, while the other section wrote with pen and paper. Results indicated a significant increase in the quantity of writing produced by the word processor students, although holistic evaluation showed no significant difference in the growth of writing quality between students using word processing and students using handwriting. (Two tables of data are included, and six references are appended.) (MM)

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Word Processing: A Helpful Tool for Basic Writers

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Word Processing: A Helpful Tool for Basic Writers

Background

More and more basic writing teachers have greater and greater access to microcomputers for their students. The microcomputer--the tool of the future, high tech brought to bear on one of the most basic academic endeavors--writing. But how should the basic writing teacher use the microcomputer? How can students utilize the machine in productive ways? Can the machine be used in counterproductive ways--ways that may actually hinder the improvement of writing? These are just some of the questions I hear being asked by writing teachers, important questions that need to be answered. But at this point, there is only scant empirical evidence on which to base pedagogical decisions when deciding how to use microcomputers in the basic writing classroom.

Surely the easiest way to use the microcomputer is as an electronic workbook. The machine can lead a student through any number of drill-and-practice grammar exercises on anything from comma use to agreement problems. And there are a multitude of slickly packaged grammar programs available, artfully marketed as "interactive," just the thing to help a student master those nagging grammar and usage

problems. Most major publishers have grammar programs keyed to their grammar texts--"Grammarlab" from Little, Brown; "Caret Patch" from Harcourt Brace; "Blue Pencil" from Prentice-Hall.

But, is there any research showing that these grammar programs contribute to improved writing quality? That is the real question, and one that is not often addressed in meaningful ways. Southwell, referring to his Grammarlab program, states that "there has been no formal evaluation of the CAI lessons by themselves, but our sense is that they make a powerful contribution to the system" [of teaching basic writers] (172). This evidence for the effectiveness of a drill-and-practice program is purely anecdotal. Yet such anecdotal evidence is fairly typical of the support offered for grammar programs. To espouse the use of the microcomputer as an electronic workbook ignores a wealth of research evidence suggesting that reductive approaches to teaching writing are not terribly productive and do not contribute to increased writing quality.

Is there a viable alternative to grammar programs? I think so. The microcomputer may be used as a word processor, and there is research evidence

that using the microcomputer as a word processor in the writing classroom is beneficial for first year college students. One large empirical study involving 200 students showed that when students use a word processor as their main writing tool within a pedagogical context based on conferencing, students produced significantly more text and, far more importantly, significantly increased their overall writing quality when compared to students using pen and paper under identical pedagogical conditions (Etchison). However, basic writers were not a part of the sample population in this study. Therefore, I thought it was important to see if word processing would have similar positive effects on basic writers, those writers who need to make the greatest improvement in writing quality in order to survive in our academic institutions.

Design

To obtain data, a small comparative design study was arranged for the fall semester of 1986 at Glenville State College, Glenville, WV. Two sections of basic writers were involved in the study, one section of word processors and one section of

handwriters. Two questions were posed:

1. Would the students using word processors significantly increase the number of words written compared to handwriters?

2. Would the students using word processors significantly increase their overall writing quality when compared to handwriters?

Writing tasks from which data were collected in this study were transactional, because as Britton et al. point out, 63.4 % of secondary school sponsored writing is transactional, a percentage that Williamson found increases when students enter college. Students wrote one explanatory essay and one persuasive essay at the beginning of the semester. At this time, all students wrote with pen and paper. Students were not told they were involved in a study, only that these first two writing samples would be used by the instructors to make some decisions on what would be covered in the class during the remainder of the semester.

Students were given these pretest writing tasks prior to the class period they actually began drafting, because Bridwell found that doing so seemed to increase involvement on the part of students.

Students were given two hours of class time and as much time as they wanted between class meetings to draft and revise each essay. The instructors made no attempt to influence the students' writing process. In fact, both instructors avoided giving any help to students during the pretest--even when students asked. The intent was to obtain representative samples of student writing prior to instruction.

At the end of the semester, students wrote two different transactional tasks for analysis, writing within the context of normal class assignments, using the writing processes developed during the semester. The experimental section wrote their papers on the word processors, the writing tool they had been using all semester, while the control section wrote with pen and paper.

The pedagogical approach used for instruction during the semester centered on student-teacher conferencing, since Clifford found that such a pedagogy encourages improved writing quality. The two instructors who taught the classes met during the semester to correlate what they were doing during class sessions, and identical writing tasks were used for all assignments in both classes. Further, since

the data would rely on transactional writing samples, all writing assignments during the semester were transactional. One reason for doing this was based on the pursuasive arguments of Mike Rose that it is essential for basic writers to work on transactional prose--the stuff they have to produce in the academy.

Instructors made every effort to establish a positive classroom atmosphere where students were constantly encouraged in their writing. Grades in these basic writing classes appear on students' records, and students receive credit, but the credit does not count towards graduation. Hence the instructors made a conscious effort to use grades to encourage students, and no student was ever given a grade below a C on any writing task.

In the word processing section, there was only one student who was a good typist. However, the non-typists did not evidence any frustration at having to proceed with a hunt-and-peck method of typing. During the semester I asked the non-typers how they felt about using the word processor as compared to writing with pen, and all agreed that word processing was easier.

As most of us who have taught basic writing

know, getting basic writers to write--to produce text--can be a major problem. Basic writers at Glenville State College do not usually rush to writing class, much less begin work on writing without some encouragement from the instructor. However, during this study, the majority of the word processing students would be at their terminals five to ten minutes before class was officially scheduled to begin, working away at their essays. And when the class period was over, it was not unusual to have to force students to leave so the incoming computer science class could get started. I was quite surprised (and pleased) at this unexpected behavior. The word processor seemed to encourage most students to spend more time producing text-- playing with the text in ways not usually seen when paper and pen are used. This alone suggests that word processing may be a productive tool in the basic writing classroom.

How did students incorporate the use of the word processor into their writing strategies? In a variety of ways. A couple of the students wrote out their first draft by hand, then typed it on the word processor. Some students developed rough outlines--more along the lines of a brainstorm than a formal

outline--and typed their initial drafts directly on the word processor using their brainstorms as a guide. Some students just started typing away. Whatever the process, the majority of the students consistently spent the whole class period actively working on their texts.

The instructor of the word processing section and the instructor of the handwriting section served as tutor/facilitators. As the instructor in the word processing section, I conferenced with students as they requested my help. Sometimes we worked right on the word processor, especially in the early stages of a draft. With later drafts, students would often bring me a hard copy to work with. No one seemed the least worried about doing extensive revising or editing, because students quickly realized how the word processor did all the drudge work--the boring recopying.

Results

The first question this study sought to answer was whether the word processor would encourage the production of text by basic writers. Therefore, all words were counted on the two pretest writing samples and the two posttest writing samples. The

results were dramatic. Students using word processing wrote a mean of 621 words more on their posttest writing tasks than did students using handwriting (Table 1). The significance test indicates that the change from the two pretests, totaled, to the two posttests, totaled, are significantly different for word processing and handwriting, $F(1, 21) = 22.03$, $p < .0001$.

Table 1

Mean Number of Words Written Prestest and Posttest

	Pretest	Posttest	Change
Word Processing	384	1304	920
Handwriting	390	689	299

Second, pretest and posttest samples were subjected to a holistic evaluation. All writing samples were printed out with the same dot matrix printer and randomly mixed so that raters would not know whether they were reading a paper written before or after instruction, or by a student in the

experimental or control section. The holistic evaluation was done by experienced writing teachers who also had previous experience in holistic scoring. The raters went through a training session before scoring each task, using anchor papers to establish the criteria for rating papers.

Results of the holistic scoring are seen in Table 2.

Table 2

Analysis of Writing Quality Change Pretest to Posttest

	Time		
Method	Pretest	Posttest	Change
Word Processing	5.8	9.5	3.6
Handwriting	5.3	8.7	3.4

The significance test showed no significant difference in growth of writing quality between students using word processing and students using handwriting, F (1,21) = .08, $p < .05$.

Implications

A study such as this one must be considered in light of what it is, a pilot study with a limited population. When the study began, there were 20 students in each section. By the end of the semester, various forms of attrition had reduced the population by almost half. To make sweeping generalizations about all basic writer populations based on this study alone would be unfair and unwise. But with that caveat in mind, it does seem possible to make a few useful observations.

First, in any study based on a small sample population, it is important to know if one or two members of that population, by virtue of extraordinary peformance levels, skewed the statistics. In the case of this study, I can say this did not happen. Measured performances were amazingly uniform for all subjects, so statistical results noted above accurately reflect the population studied.

Second, I do think that the significantly increased production of text by the basic writing students using word processors indicates the possiblity of using the word processor to advantage in basic writing classes. The word processor seemed

to encourage the production of text to an even greater degree among these basic writers than it did among the large population of college writers I studied earlier. If this is the case, and more research is needed with larger populations of basic writers to determine this more clearly, then I think teachers of basic writers would want to have their students using the word processor. For as most of us know, one of the single most difficult tasks in teaching basic writing is encouraging students to produce text.

Third, I am not terribly concerned that there were no significant differences in development of overall writing quality between the handwriters and the word processors. After all, a fifteen week semester is a short period of time, especially for basic writers. Both groups made improvements in their writing, as would be expected given the pedagogical approach employed. Perhaps significant differences might turn up later if the students who used word processing continue to do so, for the word processor has helped encourage some positive writing behavior--the production of text, and the willingness to spend time working with text. But questions

concerning the development of writing quality will require further research, including, I suspect, longitudinal study.

However, even within the limitations of this study, there are a number of positive implications. Would I go to the effort to arrange for my basic writing classes to have access to word processors if the opportunity presented itself again? I would answer with an unqualified "Yes."

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